Genealogies of the Dalit political: The transformation of *Achhut* from 'Untouched' to 'Untouchable' in early twentieth-century north India

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The essay documents the unprecedented transformation of the term Achhut in the Hindi literature from an adjective describing a quality 'untouched, [and] pure' to a noun referring to an untouchable person or caste and characterising them as impure. Using Hindustani and other language dictionaries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, prominent Hindi-language journals of the period, such as the Nagari Pracharini Patrika and Sarasvati, and the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha political and literary activism, I will trace the history and politics of the Dalit movement in the early twentieth century that may have created a new meaning of this category. In particular, I investigate the role that the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha movement, through its publication and politics, may have played a key role in proactively constituting a new meaning of the term Achhut. I also highlight the role of Nirgun Bhakti traditions, their locations in Dalit mohallas*, as crucial to the articulation of the Dalit political in North India.*

Keywords: Dalit, Adi-Hindu Mahasabha, Hindi dictionaries, Nirgun-Bhakti, Raidas

During my fieldwork in India in 2008–09, I found two-dozen pamphlets and books published by the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha Press between 1923 and 1935, and another dozen published by Mahasabha affiliates between the 1920s and the 1940s, which

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had never before been used for research. I noticed that all of the books defined *Achhut* as 'pure and undefiled'. The Mahasabha's usage of the word *Achhut* intrigued me. Today in the Hindi heartland of North India, the term *Achhut* is a pejorative word used by Hindus to refer to the untouchables. Modern Hindi dictionaries will also attest to this fact. Did Mahasabha merely reinterpret the pejorative word *Achhut* meaning 'untouchable' to mean 'undefiled' as a way to claim a pure status? Scores of Mahasabha's publications with their positive use of the term stoked my intellectual curiosity and convinced me to examine the genealogy of the word *Achhut*. McGregor's 1983 *Hindi Dictionary* distinguished between *Achhut*, a noun referring to untouchables, and *Achhuta*, an adjective referring to untouched and pure.[1] I was puzzled by how the Hindi vowel 'a', in *Achhuta*, could radically distinguish the meaning of the two words. *Hindi Sabdasagara*, the first Hindi dictionary published by the *Nagari Pracharini Sabha* in 1914 confounded me more.[2] Both *Achhut* and *Achhuta* appeared only as adjectives, referring to the conditions of being 'undefiled, pure, or virgin'. The Mahasabha's publications and the first Hindi dictionary (1914) shared this same meaning of the word *Achhut*. Clearly, Dalit groups had not in fact reinterpreted the word *Achhut*. The puzzle becomes more complicated, though. *Achhut*, as a noun, made a grand appearance in the first edition of the *Sankshipta Hindi Sabdasagara* published by the *Nagari Pracharini Sabha* in 1933.[3] It underlined this development by adding *adhunik* (modern) in parenthesis next to the noun *Achhut* to recognise this as a recent addition to the term. Discussions with David Lelyveld, Allison Busch and Sheldon Pollock only confirmed that the history of *Achhut* requires further research. They confirmed that the popular contemporary assumption that *Achhut* was originally a noun identifying untouchables is wrong. I made it my objective to uncover the transformation of the word *Achhut*, which was certainly entwined with the Dalit political engagement.

Is *Achhut* the first radical category created by Dalit groups in India for political mobilisation? The Mahasabha appropriated *Achhut* to outline a political agenda noted and discussed in the Hindi public sphere but absent in the English-language academia. In books published by the Mahasabha Press and associated Dalit groups between 1922 and 1948, *Achhut* acquired not only a political meaning but was also imbued with social and cultural depth by its use in historical and religious accounts. Access to this new body of Dalit printed sources has opened up the North Indian cultural history, especially the genealogy of the term *Achhut* and its role in mobilising Dalits. A history of *Achhut* would enable a recognition of its rich cultural moorings in North India and a new genealogy of Dalit politics.

[1] McGregor, *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, p. 16.
[2] Syamasundaradasa, *Hindi-Sabdasagars*, p. 48.
[3] Varma, *Sankshipta Hindi Sabdasagara*, p. 29.

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Studies of Dalit history in North India, including on the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha, have not really examined the position of *Achhut* as a political category created by Dalit groups. This limited engagement with the term may have to do with its established popular meaning: 'the untouchables'. Therefore, it was assumed that the Mahasabha merely reinterpreted a negative term in a new way, as untouched or pure.[4] It was viewed as lacking the potential to be recognised as a radical category, as well as being regarded a derogatory term. And yet, the Mahasabha did not actually reinterpret *Achhut*—they were putting the term's existing meaning, untouched or pure, to a new use. Our puzzle comes closer to a resolution if we recognise the influence of the *Nirgun* Bhakti protest tradition from which the Mahasabha was clearly borrowing. This tradition, as I will demonstrate below, was also embedded in Dalit villages.

Through its literary and social activism, the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha created a new political category, the *Achhut*. Drawing from an existing *Nirgun* Bhakti protest tradition, especially of Ravi Das and Kabir in Dalit *mohallas*, the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha's radical mobilisation in the first five decades of the twentieth century helped create a category that became foundational for articulating a new history and politics of Dalits in North India. Between the 1920s and the 1940s, *Achhut* had caught the Dalit social imaginary with scores of books published in this period that used the term in their titles, including a 1949 book, *Ambedkar ki Avaz Arthat Achhutoin ka Federation*.[5] *Achhut* was absent from Hindi and Hindustani dictionaries until 1933, it was not used in prominent Hindi journals until the 1920s and its English equivalent did not emerge until 1909. Given its genealogy in the *Nirgun* Bhakti tradition in Dalit *mohallas* and a distinctly non-Sanskritic and non-Brahman tradition, which I discuss in the section two of this article, it is my contention that the Mahasabha's activism transformed the word *Achhut* from a general adjective to a marker of their collective identity. The first part of the article will discuss the usage of the term *Achhut* in Hindi and Hindustani dictionaries and in mainstream Hindi media. The second part of the article will examine the role played by the Mahasabha in creating and mobilising *Achhut* as a new political identity. A history of the transformation of *Achhut* will enable us to reconsider, as I will show below, important aspects of the intellectual and cultural history of India.

Achhut: Hindi Dictionaries and Media

An inquiry into the historical transformation of *Achhut* highlights the role of the Hindi media, owned by the urban-based reform-minded Hindus, and the role of Mahasabha in altering its existing meaning and creating a new political category.

[4] Khare, *The Untouchable as Himself*; Narayan and Misra, *Multiple Marginalities*; Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability*.

[5] Viyougi, *Ambedkar Ki Avaz*.

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The appropriation and transition of *Achhut* is also indicative of new conversations taking place in North India at this time. Drawing from a variety of Hindustani and Indian-language dictionaries and supplementing with surveys of prominent Hindi-language journals, I demonstrate that *Achhut* as a noun that refers to the untouchables as a category of society emerged only in the early twentieth century. Sanskrit terms such as *asprishya*, *antayaja jatis* and *nichi jati* were widely used to represent untouchable communities. The Prakrit-language word *chhut* (the verb *chupta*, in Sanskrit), referring to the 'impurity of touch that is polluting', represented untouchability in the popular domain.

The 1993 McGregor *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* defines *Achhut* (noun) as (i) 'adj. & m. [masculine] untouched: 1. not to be touched, untouchable, 2. m. an untouchable (caste, person)' and (ii) '*achhuta*, adj. 1. untouched; undefiled; pure; unused; virgin; not to be touched (as food for religious persons). 2. not taken up, or tried'.[6] This elaborate distinction between *Achhut* and *Achhuta* did not exist in the first edition of the Hindi dictionary edited by the prominent scholar of Hindi literature, Syamsundara Dasa. *Achhut* and *Achhuta* were defined in identical fashion, 'undefiled, pure, untouched, and virgin'.[7] He was building on the already established understanding of the word *Achhut* in Hindustani language and dictionaries. Several editions of the nineteenth-century Hindustani dictionaries, John Shakespear's 1834 *Hindustani and English* dictionary, John Platts's 1884 *Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English*, define *Achhut* as an adjective but not as a noun.[8] S.W. Fallon's 1879 *New Hindustani-English Dictionary* illustrates the point well. It defines 'a-chhuta' as 'au=not and *chhut*=to touch', that is, (i) 'Untouched; unpolluted, and untasted'; (ii) 'Not used; quite new'; (iii) 'Fresh; new, not broached', (iv) 'Holy; not to be touched; and "Maid, virgin"'.[9] Regardless of the variations, as examples from Hindi and Hindustani dictionaries demonstrate, and as Syamsundara Dasa states in the notes to the first edition of the *Sabdasagara*, *Achhut* was used only in *padas* or verse literature.

The question I kept asking myself was whether the word was used in the *mohallas* and *tolas* of North Indian countryside at this time. Syamasundara Dasa answered this question for me in the introduction to the *Hindi Sabdasagara*. He emphasised that 'for the *Sabdasagara* the [Nagari Pracharini] Sabha didn't rely only on the books', but deliberately adopted the ethnographic method of fieldwork to collect words that were used in day-to-day conversations (*nitya ki bolchal… shabda*) in Hindi, which may be absent in the literature. To achieve this goal, the *Nagari Pracharini Sabha* hired Munshi Ramlaganlal, who spent two years in the city of Benares and the surrounding countryside, to collect words used in the *jati*

[6] McGregor, *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, p. 16.

[7] Syamsundardasa, *Hindi-Sabdasagar*, p. 58.

[8] Shakespear, *A Dictionary, Hindustani and English*, p. 45; Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu*, *Classical Hindi*, *and English*, p. 28.

[9] Fallon, *A New Hindustani-English Dictionary*, p. 48.

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mohallas (caste neighbourhoods) of all castes and in different trade and occupations of various groups. The introduction mentions Dalit castes and occupations as sites of investigation.[10] In the context of social, economic and cultural settings in the villages and *qasbas* (market towns) of North India, one would hear the *jati* names of untouchable castes like Chamar, Bhangi and Pasi or the more generic name like *nichi jati ke log*.

There is another reason why the word *Achhut* could not have been translated as untouchable until the early decades of the twentieth century. The English word 'untouchable', as a noun referring to Dalits in India, emerged only in the first decade of the twentieth century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the origin of the word 'untouchable' in its specific Indian usage to 1909.[11] The first exhaustive discussion on the term and usage of the word 'untouchable' for *Antyajas* takes place in the pages of the 1901 census. It is used for the first time to classify groups considered ritually and occupationally impure who live in spatially marked *jati mohallas*.[12] The word 'untouchable' did not exist in the nineteenth century. S.W. Fallon's *New Hindustani-English Dictionary* (1879), John Platts's *The Hindi-English Dictionary* (1883) and William Crooke's *Caste and Tribe Volumes* (1896) demonstrate that the preferred terms for describing and discussing Dalit communities in North India were 'outcastes' or 'non-Aryans'.[13] The 1891 provincial census used the term 'village menials' to classify untouchables who performed polluting occupations.[14] The 1922 article in the *Asiatic Review* argued that the word 'untouchable was first used in 1906'. It claimed that 'the term "Untouchable", as a name for the "Depressed Classes", or "outcastes" is a revival of the most ancient designation of these people', the *asprishya*.[15]

By suggesting that *Achhut* was used only in the *padas* or verse literature and citing two couplets from Malik Muhammad Jayasi's masterpiece *Padmavat*, Syamasundara Dasa was also alerting us to its *Nirgun* Bhakti and Sufi origins. The word *Achhut* originated in the specific *Nirgun* and Sufi Bhakti protest tradition that was starkly different from Hindu tradition. Composed in Awadhi language and written in Persian script by Malik Muhammad Jayasi in 1540, *Padmavat* marks a religious and literary departure in South Asian history. According to eminent Hindi scholar Ramchandra Shukla, *Padmavat* influenced the composition of another Awadhi classic, Tulsidasa's *Ramcharitmanas* (Song in Praise of Lord Rama). Aditya Behl and Ramya Sreenivasan have argued that the *Padmavat*,

[10] Syamsundardasa, 'Introduction to the First Edition', p. 3.

[11] http://proxy.library.upenn.edu:2256/view/Entry/219013?redirectedFrom=untouchables#eid. Accessed on 20 May 2014.

[12] *Census of India*, *1901*, vol. 16, pt. 1, *Report*, *North West Provinces and Oudh*, pp. 231–33.

[13] Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, Vol. II and Vol. III*, pp. 170, 189, 313–14.

[14] *Census of India*, *1891*, vol. 9, pt. 16, *Report, North-West Provinces and Oudh*, pp. 309–13.

[15] Stanton, 'The Untouchables and Their Enumeration', pp. 172–73.

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located in the Awadh region of North India, was informed by Persian and *Desi* (Indic) narratives and multiple religious traditions such as Chishti Sufi, *Nirgun* Bhakti, heterodox *Nathpanth*, Vaishnavism and Sunni Islam.[16] Jayasi attests to the *Nirgun* influences in his work by using *gusain* or *karataru* to describe the Creator (god) as formless and without attributes. Behl has argued that the objective of Jayasi, and other Sufi romances of this time, was to set up a '*desi* Islamic tradition' to 'represent Islam in local dress' and 'through local gods and goddesses' create a total 'integration of a monotheistic faith into a polytheistic cultural landscape' of India.[17] Jayasi's use of the word *Achhut* emphasised the purity of a substance or of a maid. It is worth citing Jayasi's use of *Achhut* because of its sheer literary pleasure and, in this case, to understand Dalit's historical and political intervention in the North Indian intellectual history.

> Luxuriously full of nectar they are [the luscious lips of Padmawati], they are 'untouched', none has licked them. (Stanza 106, *Padmavat*)
> Picking up the basket [a gift] and filled with the 'puri', fried wheat-cakes; the messenger, taking a vow, departed towards Chittor. (Stanza, 589) Soaked were the breasts covered under the wet blouse, the sari, and the necklace; 'untouched' were they, and the lover didn't unbutton them. (Stanza, 620)[18]

This usage of the word *Achhut* appears in several other contexts in the compositions of *Nirgun* Bhakti Sants between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries (Sant in Hindi and Saint in English, I will use the former in this essay). Winand Callewaert's 2009 *Dictionary of Bhakti* attests to this dominant meaning in the following sources, Jayasi's *Padmavat*, Anandtadasa's *Parcai* and Gopaldasa's *Sarvangi*.[19] The following quote from the *Parcai of Pipa* (Introduction of Sant Pipa) tells us that *Achhut* had acquired a continuity within the Bhakti tradition:

> All the food that had been cooked in the house,
> also the untouched food, Pipa did not refuse.

The *New Hindustani-English Dictionary*, by S.W. Fallon, cites a couplet from Nazir Akbarabadi's poems to illustrate the use of *Achhut*; 'unpolluted' as in a kitchen, 'unused or new' as in a blanket and 'holy' as in an offering to god.[20] Based primarily on Saint Surdas's writings but also drawing from other poets, the

[16] Introduction and chapters 5 and 6 in Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic*. Introduction in Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen*.
[17] Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic*, p. 176.
[18] Shukla, *Jayasi-Granthavali*, pp. 44, 268, 285. Translations are mine.
[19] Callewaert, *Dictionary of Bhakti, Vol. I*, p. 45.
[20] Fallon, *A New Hindustani-English Dictionary*, p. 48.

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Brajbhasha Sur-Kosh (the Braj-language dictionary of Surdas), composed in the 1940s, defines *Achhuta* and *Achhute* as virgin or pure.[21]

The prominent *Nirgun* Bhakti Sants (Saints) such as Kabir, Raidas and Nanak began to use the word *Achhut* or 'pure' and 'untouched' to define the formless lord who is identified by more than a dozen names. In Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the Hindi word *Achhut* is written slightly differently in Gurumukhi as *achhat* and it is used to define the formless god, the *Puran*, the *Abinasi* and *Nam*. As in 'pooran purakh *achhat* abhinaasee jas vayd puraanee gaa-i-aa' [the Vedas and the Puraanas sing the Praises of the Perfect, Unchanging, Imperishable Primal Lord].[22] These Sants challenged the Hindu theology, the superiority and dominance of Brahmins and their efforts to justify the status of outcastes. Equally relevant is the fact that Kabir and Raidas questioned Brahminism at the heart of Hinduism, the city of Benaras. Many of their poems and stories teach Brahmins a lesson. According to these Sants, the god without a name and attribute, *Nirgun*, would never justify discriminatory practices. They challenged the purity of Brahmans by arguing that in our everyday life all beings are defiled by touch (*chhut*). In this respect, Kabir's Shabda 41 is the most-cited and discussed verse from *Bijak*. I emphasise this *pada* (verse) because it is used repeatedly in all the publications of the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha. In the first part of Shabda 41, Kabir addresses the question of untouchability and concludes by questioning its spiritual premises.

> Pandit [Brahman], look in your heart for knowledge,
> Tell me where untouchability [chhutti or chhut]
> came from, since you believe in it.
> Mix red juice, white juice and air—
> a body bakes in a body.
> As soon as the eight lotuses
> are ready, it comes
> into the world. Then what's
> untouchable?
> [And]
> We eat by touch, we wash by touch, we are born by touch
> So who's untouched? Asks Kabir,
> One who is untouched by *maya* [world, i.e., god][23]

Demonstrating *Achhut's Nirgun* Bhakti genealogy is valuable in helping us grasp its appropriation by the Mahasabha in 1922, which, as I discuss in the next section, is a product of practices in Dalit *mohallas*.

[21] Tandon, *Brajbhasha Sur-Kosh*, p. 26. The introduction mentions the dates 1946–49. See the introduction for a discussion of sources for composing the dictionary.

[22] *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 783.

[23] Hess and Singh, *The Bijak of Kabir*, pp. 55–56.

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Given the largely unrecognised origins of the word *Achhut* in the *Nirgun* Bhakti tradition, and its absence as a noun in the Hindi dictionaries, the relatively late appearance of its English equivalent the 'untouchable', I decided to examine the two most prominent journals of Hindi in the early twentieth century, the *Nagari Pracharini Patrika* and the *Sarasvati* for any uses of *Achhut* as a noun. My objective was to identify the words used to describe untouchables and the context in which they were used in these two journals in order to comprehend the shifts taking place at this time in North India. I examined monthly issues of *Sarasvati*, edited by Mahavir Prasad Dvivedi and published from Allahabad between 1900 and 1925, and issues of *Nagari Pracharini Patrika*, edited by Syamasundara Dasa and published from Benares between 1897 and 1925 (quarterly until 1906 and monthly from 1907).[24] I found a total of only eight references to untouchables in these two journals, which is a miniscule number given that these were monthly publications. Depending on the theme and object of the story, three terms (i) *nichi jati* (low or unclean caste), (ii) *asprishya jati* (untouchables) and (iii) *dalit* (oppressed or exploited) were used in specific contexts in these two journals to describe Dalits. In contrast, I found two very contrasting references to *Achhut*. It seems in the first three decades of the twentieth century, *nichi jati*, *asprishya jati* and *dalit* were widely used terms for the Dalits.[25]

The terms used in the Hindi media of the time to describe the untouchable community were *nichi jati* and *asprishya jati*. The first reference to the untouchables, *nichi jati*, occurs in the pages of *Nagari Pracharini Patrika* in June 1904. *Nichi jati* was a popular term used to describe the social and economic conditions of untouchables in the *qasbas* (market towns) and *mohallas* (villages) of North India. A June 1904 article 'Lucknow Zillah ka Bhugol' (the Geography of Lucknow District) in *Nagari Pracharini Patrika*, based on the 1901 census report, discussed the religious practices of various castes including those belonging to *Nichi Jati* such as Chamar and Pasis'. It portrayed *Nichi Jati* as 'Hindu atheists' because they worshipped only local gods.[26] An April 1914 essay in *Sarasvati* on 'Religion in United Provinces' bemoans the large numbers of conversions among people of *Nichi Jati* to Christianity.[27] I found the first reference to the Sanskrit term *asprishya jati* in an eight-page long review essay on Booker T. Washington's autobiography, *Up from Slavery* (1901), which was translated and published in Marathi, *Atmaoddhar*. The essay provides a brief account of Booker Washington's life, outlining major milestones and struggles therein. In the final paragraph, the author mentions that although India does not have a system of slavery similar to the US, it does have 50 million people belonging to *asprishya jati*. The author hopes that the untouchables in India will produce a figure similar

[24] The SOAS collection of *Nagari Pracharini Patrika* was missing issues from 1914 to 1922.

[25] It goes without saying that I do not endorse pejorative terms such as *nichi jati* and *asprishya jati*.

[26] Pandit Rukmaninandan Sharma, 'Lucknow Zillah ka Bhugol', *Nagari Pracharini Patrika*, June, 1904.

[27] 'Religion, Education, and Physical Deformities in United Provinces', *Sarasvati*, April 1914.

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to Booker Washington that will transform the conditions of these people.[28] *Asprishya jati* was more often used as a catholic category referring to a universal notion of untouchables, while *nichi jati* was used to describe the specific caste groups such as Chamars, Pasi and Bhangi.

'Dalit', a Sanskrit word, was also used widely in the specific contexts of the politics of religious conversion and the oppression of untouchables, lower castes and lower classes in North India in the early twentieth century. The term was first used by writers in the Hindi literary journal *Sarasvati* and subsequently by writers in other Hindi journals such as *Pratap* and *Chand* from the 1910s and 1920s onwards.[29] *Sarasvati*'s March 1914 regular column titled 'Vividh Vishay' discussed at length the deplorable conditions of 'dalits' in the Hindu society. Throughout this article, I will distinguish the present-day use of 'Dalit' with a capital 'D' from the early twentieth-century North Indian Hindi use of 'dalit' without caps. A January 1917 poem 'Patitoin ki Pukar', narrated the unjust conditions of Dalits in India and warned that they would one day rise and smash Hinduism. However, by 1922 the term 'dalit' was beginning to be used extensively in the Hindi media in news reports, articles and editorials in the context of discussing the conditions of 'untouchables' in the Indian society. I found several references to Dalits in the weekly newspaper *Pratap*.[30] Many of these articles, such as the July 1925 article 'Hindu Manubhav', by Santaram, discussed the 'dalitoddhar' (caste-Hindu-led reform activities among dalits) taking place in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh.[31] We may note that these newspapers were managed by reform-minded caste-Hindu editors who were deeply influenced by Arya Samaj.

'Dalit' and 'dalitoddhar' were widely used terms in the Arya Samaj publications and also by the caste-Hindu publicists and followers of Arya Samajists who were concerned about the conversion of untouchables to Christianity. *Dalitoddhar* by Kanwar Chandkaran Sharda, and published by Durgaprasad Press in Ajmer in 1924, raised concerns about the treatment of dalits in Hindu society and outlined measures to improve and reform their conditions.[32] The measures outlined were informed by the author's Arya Samaj convictions, encouraging dalits to give up their impure lifestyle, cease eating beef and adopt Hindu rituals and practices. Similarly, a 1929 book on untouchability and Arya Samaj urged Hindus to actively involve dalits in social and cultural activities and functions.[33] The 1929 history of

[28] 'Booker T. Washington: Granth Parichay', *Sarasvati*, February 1914.

[29] Dalit may have been used in other newspapers as well but I did not look at them because of various constraints. The main reason being that these are recognised Hindi journals.

[30] A select references from *Sarasvati* and *Pratap* journals. *Sarasvati*: 'Vividh Vishay', March 1914; 'Patitoin ki Pukar', January 1917; 'Hindu Manubhav', February 1925. *Pratap*: 'Greetings from *Achhut*', 18 February 1924; 'Answers from *Achhut*', 24 November 1924; 'Hindu's ``Frog in a Well'' Mentality', 20 April 1925; 'Stay Hindus or Become Muslims', 9 June 1925; 'Will the Hindus Perish', 21 March 1926.

[31] 'Hindu Manubhav', by Santram, *Sarasvati*, July 1925.

[32] Sharda, *Dalitoddhar*, pp. 4–8.

[33] Shastri, *Chhua-chhut Aur Arya Samaj*, pp. 3–4.

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Arya Samaj in Bijnor district of Uttar Pradesh outlines activism among the dalits who were mostly Chamars. This included reconverting Chamars to Hinduism from Christianity, opening schools for them in certain villages and even running night schools in Arya Samaj temples in the town of Bijnor.[34]

Given its widespread use in the Hindi media in the 1920s, I was surprised to learn that 'Dalit', according to Eleanor Zelliot, is a Marathi word and emerged in western India.[35] The normative understanding, as a recent scholar states, is that 'Dalit' was 'first coined in the 1920s' in Maharashtra, but it came into popular use after the 1970s in the context of the Dalit Panthers and Dalit writers' movement in Maharashtra.[36] Because 'Ambedkar first used the term *dalit* in his journal *Bahishkrit Bharat* (Outcaste India), in 1928', his discussion of the term presented a 'set of political idioms' that 'converted the negative identity of the untouchable into the political potentiality and historical agency of the Dalit'.[37] Associating the term with Ambedkar, his use in 1928, is crucial in Maharashtrian history to mark Dalits' historical and political genealogy. The much-cited first reference to the term dalit in the Marathi newspaper *Bahishkrit Bharat*, edited by Ambedkar, appeared on 7 December 1928 in the context of the name of a committee. The committee, chaired by Dr Solanki, was called 'Untouchable, Low, and Dalit Castes' Educational, Social, and Economic Conditions' and was established by the government of the Bombay Presidency.[38] The distinction between the terms untouchable and dalit is worthy of note. The second reference to the term is its use by Ambedkar in an editorial in *Bahishkrit Bharat*, published on 1 February 1929. In this case too, Ambedkar uses the term 'Dalit' in its dominant meaning, the meaning already widespread in Hindi, to mean the economically and socially oppressed lower castes, untouchables and lower classes in India.[39] In these two issues of *Bahishkrit Bharat*, Ambedkar repeatedly used the term *asprishya-jatis* when he specifically referred to the untouchables. Regardless, Dalit was not used as a noun in these two issues. 'Dr Ambedkar did not popularize the term "Dalit" for untouchables', but his philosophy has remained a key source for the formulation of this category.[40] As this example illustrates, the politics and history of naming are crucial to any social and political movement. A closer examination of the category *Achhut* promises to open up the debate on

[34] Prasad Ji, *Bijnore Mandal Arya Samaj*, pp. 83–90, 106–08, 166–67.

[35] Zelliot, 'Dalit—New Cultural Context for an Old Marathi Word', p. 267.

[36] Paik, 'Mahar-Dalit-Buddhist: The History and Politics of Naming in Maharashtra', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, p. 228. Guru, 'The Language of Dalit-Bahujan Political Discourse', pp. 100–01.

[37] Rao, *The Caste Question*, pp. 15–16.

[38] *Bahishkrit Bharat*, 7 December 1928, p. 201 (7). Santosh Suradkar, Marathi Dalit doctoral student in the History Department at Jawaharlal Nehru University generously shared the newspaper from his collection.

[39] *Bahishkrit Bharat*, 9 February 1929, p. 228 (2). Conversations (via email) with Christian Novetzke helped clarify many issues relating to the category Dalit. It also became clear that we need a study in Marathi on the genealogy of the term Dalit.

[40] Shah, 'Introduction: Dalit Politics', pp. 20–24.

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the politics of naming relating to the Dalit, and offers the possibility of better understanding the history of their political mobilisation.

By examining the Hindi lexicon and the Hindi media, we have discovered that *Achhut* was not used to describe Dalits in the first two decades of the twentieth century or in the previous century. I found only two instances of *Achhut* in the two Hindi journals. The first usage was in a January 1913 essay on the 'Third Hindi Sahitya Sammelan', published in the *Nagari Pracharini Patrika*. Admiring Chand Bardai for his literary knowledge and skills in covering numerous themes in his writings, the essay argued that he did not leave any theme *achhuta* (untouched).[41]

My second example is a poem by Ramchandra Shukla titled *Achhut ki Ah* published in *Sarasvati* in April 1914. Impersonating an untouchable, Shukla lays out a long list of values and aspirations that 'we' share with the *dwijas* (caste-Hindus) along with the same love for our 'beautiful' religion. It also allows a high caste Brahman Ramachandra Shukla to sing praises of Hinduism. This is the only instance that the term *Achhut* is used in the journal *Sarasvati*.[42] Given that the journal *Sarasvati* used *nichi jati* or *asprishya jati* to describe untouchables, it might be useful to understand this one-time use of the term *Achhut*. The poem does not discuss untouchables and their community. Instead, it sings to the glory of Hindu civilisation and religion. Shukla insists that the untouchables and the caste Hindus are *Achhuts* (untouched) because both share a common heritage, belong to the same religion, worship the same gods, and have similar dreams and expectations. At the end, Shukla asks how can we equate untouchables with *chhut*, the untouchability. In order to educate his middle class, caste-Hindu audience, Shukla qualifies the use of *Achhut* from *chhut* by using them together in order to distinguish the latter. This formulation was deliberate on Shukla's part and vital to the structure of his poem. This is crucial to its use in the second and final instance towards the end of the poem where Shukla does not have to explain the use of *Achhut*. It can then stand alone to define the untouchable status of those he addresses as *Achhut*.

> We, *Achhut* [untouched] are defined with *chhut* [untouchability]
> While, the *dwijas* who commit sin, are defined as pure,
> Brothers of the same community, they call us separate,
> Oh lord, are they [the Brahmans] your agents.[43]

The Prakrit-language word *chhut*, the polluting touch, and Kabir's more colloquial usage *chhutti*, refers to untouchability as a linguistic and social category in Hindi language. Derived from the root Sanskrit word *chupta*, the word, *chhut* or

[41] 'Third Hindi Conference Report', in *Nagari Pracharini Patrika*, January 1914.

[42] I have not been able to find Hira Dom's 'Achhut ki Shikayat', published in *Sarasvati* magazine in 1914, Narayan and Misra, *Multiple Marginalities*, p. 16. However, the November and December 1914 issues of *Sarasvati* were missing in the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi.

[43] Ramchandra Shukla, '*Achhut ki Ah*', *Sarasvati*, October 1914.

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chhutti, signifies 'defiled by touching', 'unclean'.[44] Shukla's use of *chhut* in this fashion is remarkably similar to its use by Kabir in Shabda 41 and also by the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha in its publications. Shabda 41 from Kabir's *Bijak*, which I quoted above, uses the word '*chhutti* eight times in seven-and-a-half lines'.[45] As Linda Hess argues, in Shabda 41 Kabir plays on several possible meanings to challenge the distinction between touchable and untouchable, ending the verse by saying that everyone contains a polluting touch (*chhutti*) except the untouched and pure, the formless god. Given this distinction in Kabir's verses, and in other verses of Sant literature demonstrated earlier, the opposite of *chhut* could only be *Achhut* (pure).

It was only in the Hindi weekly newspaper *Pratap*, that I found nearly nine references to the use of the word *Achhut* between 1913 and 1923. The first six references in *Pratap* were almost all translations of the term 'untouchable' in Lala Lajpat Rai's articles and lectures.[46] A major theme in Lajpat Rai's articles was Hindu reform and the perceived threat of Dalit conversions to Christianity. It seems *Achhut* was used as a literal translation of English 'untouchable', as a catholic category, to discuss the new emergent politics of Hindu groups' concerns over the conversion of Dalits to Christianity. In discussions of economic and social issues of Dalits and descriptions of their society, other terms such as *nichi jati* or the specific caste names (Chamars, Bhangis or Pasi) were used. By the 1920s, *Achhut* and 'dalit' may have replaced the other catholic term *asprishya jati*, and the reform-minded Hindus preferred these new terms in public discussions over conversions. In addition, both *Achhut* and 'dalit' were devoid of any pejorative connotations associated with other terms used to represent untouchables in Hindi media in discussions relating to politics and religious conversion. These two new terms were used increasingly in caste-Hindu literature to describe Dalit issues relating to the politics of reform (*Achhutoddhar* and *dalitoddhar*) instituted by Hindu groups. The Hindu middle class, inspired by Arya Samaj ideals of removing ills from Hindu society, began to prefer the term *Achhut* or 'dalit' because linguistically they removed all negative connotations associated with the community. A discussion of *Pratap* can help us recognise the very unique use of these two terms because they were associated with the politics of conversion, which had acquired a new urgency in the early twentieth century.

The constituents of the mainstream Hindi public sphere were quick to recognise the emergence of a new term, *Achhut*, as a new development in the Hindi language. Goswami Shastri writes, in his 1929 book titled *Chhua-Chhut and Arya Samaj*,

[44] Turner, *A Comparative Dictionary of Indo-Aryan Languages*, p. 278.

[45] Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh, *The Bijak of Kabir*, p. 56.

[46] *Pratap*, 'Hinduoin ka Hinduoin mein Julum' (Oppression by Hindus on Hindus), 21 December 1913, 'Hindu Jati ki Samajik Vayavastha' (The Social Organization of Hindu Society), 18 January 1914, 'Hindu Jati ki Samajik Vayavastha' Part II, 25 January 1914, 'Hinduoin ki Unnati' (The Progress of Hindus), 1 March 1914.

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published from Lahore, that these days 'the *antyaja's* are now called as *Achhut*'.[47] The special issue of *Chand* titled *Achhut Ank* (Untouchable Issue) published in May 1927 attests to the term's new normal place within the Hindu public sphere. It focused on the urgency of giving Dalits a respectable position within Hindi society and the politics of reform among untouchables. The *Nagari Pracharini Sabha*'s new edition of the *Sankshipta Hindi Sabdasagara* (Concise Hindi Dictionary) in 1933 for the first time can distinguish between the adjective and the noun meanings of the term *Achhut*.[48] In a rare instance of editorial insight, Ramchandra Verma, the editor of the abridged Hindi dictionary, felt that it was vital to indicate with an asterisk the new noun usage of *Achhut* as *adhunik* or modern. The second edition of the *Sankshipta Hindi Sabdasagara* in 1945 also identified and defined the term *Achhutoddhar*, the caste-Hindu politics of reforming untouchables by adopting a defined set of principles.[49] The example of the new noun meaning of the term (*Achhut*) that appeared in 1933 to denote untouchables stands in sharp contrast to the references for its adjectival use that can be traced to the fifteenth-century *Nirgun* Bhakti Saints.

Given its origin in *Nirgun* Bhakti protest traditions and acknowledged in the Hindustani lexicon and its use by Sufi poets and by *Nirgun* Sants in their *padyas* (verses), we can safely conclude that the word *Achhut* was rarely used to describe untouchables prior to the twentieth century. In the Sufi and *Nirgun* tradition, *Achhut* was used to describe the purity or undefiled status of a place, person and the liberated soul (god). The preferred terms to describe untouchables in the prominent Hindi-language journals were *asprishya jati*, *nichi jati* and *dalit*, and the choice by the writers between these terms was contextually motivated. The term that described untouchability was *chhut* or *chhutti*. *Achhut*'s use by the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha in the 1920s gave the term a visibility and location that may have played a crucial role in its transformation into a noun.

Adi-Hindu Mahasabha's Activism

The Adi-Hindu Mahasabha's literary and political activism, given their social status, represents a significant intervention in North Indian history that we have only now begun to appreciate. Drawing from the *Nirgun* Bhakti tradition as it resonated in the Dalit *mohallas*, the Mahasabha's brilliant Dalit activists recognised the value of a word, the *Achhut*, that challenged the meaning and practice of untouchability based on the idea of *chhut*, the polluting touch. These activists in their publications used the word *Achhut* in its dominant meaning current in the Hindi public sphere, untouched and pure, especially in the *Nirgun* Bhakti tradition. And yet, the Hindi public sphere, committed to its religious and

[47] Shastri, *Chhua-chhut Aur Arya Samaj*, p. 5.
[48] Varma, *Sankshipta Hindi Sabdasagara*, p. 29.
[49] Syamsundardasa, *Hindi-Sabdasagar*, p. 59.

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cultural inheritance, grouped *Achhut* as an additional pejorative word similar to *asprishya* or *niche* jati. The word *Achhut* was central to formulating a Dalit agenda, reinterpreting India's history and creating a new set of idioms for political and cultural intervention. Acknowledging the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha's political depth in the spheres of print and in public space will help us understand its cultural intervention.

A cultural and political organisation, the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha was founded by Swami Achhutanand in December 1923 in Etawah at a meeting attended by nearly 25,000 *Achhut* activists.[50] Several leading activists and wealthy businessmen based in Delhi, Kanpur, Mainpuri, Etawah and Moradabad districts provided financial support to establish the Mahasabha. In 1923, Achhutanand founded the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha Press which published scores of books on *Nirgun* Bhakti tradition and the history of Adi-Hindu civilisation, books that continue to be published by Bahujan Samaj Prakashan and other Dalit presses even today. It also published a fortnightly newspaper called *Adi-Hindu* from 1924 to 1934. It also established several schools and hostels such as the Adi-Hindu hostel established in 1933 at Allahabad. By 1926, prominent Hindi newspapers, such as, *Pratap*, *Aaj* and *Chand*, commented on the new Dalit movement. In April 1925, Gyanesh Shankar Vidyarthi wrote an editorial on the rise of 'new consciousness' among *Achhuts* of North India. According to Vidyarthi, 'from Delhi to Kanpur a new line has been drawn and it will continue to spread…in the districts of Agra, Etawah and in Kanpur scores of people are working' to expand this movement.[51] I will give you one example of the strength and depth of the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha movement.

A real challenge to the Congress during the non-cooperation movement came from the counter-demonstration organised by Swami Achhutanand in Delhi to welcome the Prince of Wales. Achhutanand and G.A. Gavai had deliberately organised the third All India Depressed Classes Conference in Delhi, 13–16 February 1922 to coincide with the Prince of Wales's visit. In addition to the Dalit leaders who came from different parts of India, nearly 25,000 Dalits had assembled at the conference venue on the grounds of Old Fort in New Delhi for 5 days. On Tuesday 14 February 1922, this strong contingent of Dalits gathered near the Khyber Pass in North Delhi to welcome the Prince of Wales.[52] Shouting slogans welcoming the Prince of Wales and expressing their support of the British government, the activists welcomed the Prince's caravan as it passed the Khyber Pass on its way to the Viceroy Camp in North Delhi. Earlier during the day, on 14 February,

[50] Jatav, *Shri 108 Swami Achhutanand Ji ka Jeevan Parichay*, p. 14; Raj, *Swami Achhutanand Harihar*, p. 41.

[51] 'Adi-Hindu Andoolan', *Pratap*, 27 April 1925.

[52] This paragraph is based on the following sources: Lahiri, *The Prince of Wales' Complete Tour in India and Burma*, pp. 192–93, 220–22; Williams, *The History of the Indian Tour of the H. R. H. the Prince of Wales*, pp. 165–75; *The Statesman*, 15 and 18 February 1922; and *The Pioneer*, 16 and 19 February 1922.

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this vocal contingent of Dalits had marched through Old Delhi, the Civil Lines, towards the Khyber Pass. The press reports noted that the bands of non-cooperation volunteers belonging to the Congress tried to obstruct Dalits from walking to the Khyber Pass. Ignoring the Congress demonstration, the Mahasabha activists continued with their counter-demonstration. On their way back to the conference venue at Old Fort, the strong Dalit contingent walked through the main streets of Delhi shouting slogans in support of the prince and the British government. Three days later, on Friday 17 February 1922, the Prince of Wales made an unscheduled stop to greet the *Achhut* contingent. At this meeting, the Prince of Wales received a memorandum from Achhutanand and Gavai. They urged the British government to recognise *Achhuts*' political rights by giving them a separate electorate, which would enable them to elect Dalit representatives to legislative bodies. In addition, they wanted the government to nominate *Achhuts* to the corporations in towns and cities and in panchayats, hire Dalit supervisors in the government-run untouchable schools, reserve a percentage of positions in the administration, the schools and colleges and provide Dalit students with scholarships.

The Adi-Hindu Mahasabha's 1926 Mainpuri conference report, published by its press in Kanpur, described this set of rights as *Achhuts*' *mulki haq*.[53] This spectacular 1922 event occurred while Mahatma Gandhi was in the midst of mobilising the first all-India mass nationalist campaign, and well before the pre-eminent Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar had returned from studying law in London and actively entered the political scene. Indeed, all the prominent English-language newspapers published from Delhi and other parts of India printed a separate report on the presence of such large numbers of untouchables who came to welcome the Prince of Wales. Elsewhere, I have argued that this visible show of public support in Delhi and other urban centres of North India—physically capturing the public space with their bodies—is a promising starting point from which to re-evaluate the history of public space and genealogies of Indian liberalism.[54]

The beginning of the new political practice, the counter-demonstration, coincided with the appropriation of a new term by the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha, the *Achhut* in North India. From 1922 onwards, the Mahsabha began to use *Achhut* to mobilise all untouchables and question the historical practices associated with the polluting touch (*chhut*) in Hindu society. The term *Achhut* was defined and clarified in several publications of the Mahasabha Press in order to communicate with the people and to demonstrate the value of a new category being created to describe the community. Because the *Nirgun* Sants questioned caste hierarchy and the spiritual legitimacy of discrimination and because they argued that god is formless (*Nirgun*), pure and untouched (*Achhut*), the Mahasabha always found a compelling discourse

[53] *Adi Hindu Sabha Mainpuri Ka karya Sar Aur UP Conference ka Vivaran. 1926*, five pages.

[54] Chapter II, 'Public Space and Practices of Popular protests', book manuscript, 'Parallel Publics: A New History of Indian Democracy '.

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in these saints that was already popular among the Dalit community. The Adi-Hindu Mahasabha Press published several tracts and pamphlets on the teachings of Raidas and Kabir. The 30-odd publications I collected use their verses to popularise *Achhut* as a new category of collective identity on which to base historical and political claims. In defining *Achhut* as a condition in relation to God, one who cannot be touched, a major refrain in medieval Bhakti poetry, the first generation of Dalit ideologues were using it to give their new struggle a history and legitimacy. Shabda 41 from Kabir's *Bijak* was used on the jacket cover of all of the Mahasabha's publications: 'Says Kabir, who's untouched? One who is not touched by Maya (the supernatural)!' *The Adi-Hindu Bhajanavali: Part Four* (1924), consisting of 16 pages, contains a number of short and long verses in different genres such as *doha*, *ghazal*, *dadra* and *rasiya*. Achhutanand's *bhajan* on the cover page of the tract captures the core message of the Mahasabha publications—note the use of *Achhut* and *chhut* in the first line of the verse, which is similar to Shukla's use of these two terms in his poem:

> Given the lowest status, *Achhuts* are free from the impurity of touch,
> [*Nichi* giraya par *Achhut chhut* se hum hain bari]
> There is no purity in the nations of impure [sankar-varna], but we are Hari,
> Descendants of Hind's ancient civilization, entitled we are,
> Yes, slavery bound us to the bottom, we were kings at one point,
> In this new age, *Achhuts'*, fight against oppression,
> Break the chains that bound us, smash the tradition of slavery.[55]

The verses in the 1924 *Bhajanavali* cover a number of topics topical to the Mahasabha's politics: A *ghazal* on page 3 asks Dalits to set up printing presses and publish newspapers and books. Several poems appeal to individuals to organise the community by investing money and time, a *rasiya* verse welcomes the British rule for its commitment to equality and a *Dadra* verse upholds the value of education for *Achhut* children and especially the girls.

The eight-page *Adi-Hindu Bhajan Sangraha* (1926) contains a number of short and long verses in different genres, such as, 'Chetavani', 'Bhajan', 'Theatre Raga' and 'Lavani'.[56] These verses also reinforce the reading of *Achhut* as pure and untouched, which is distinguished from the other terms used to describe Dalits such as Shudra, *nichi jati* or *Dasa* (slaves). In another poem written in the *qavvali* (Sufi devotional singing) genre, Achhutanand highlights the role of *bhasha anusandhan* (linguistic research) that has proved Aryans' common lineage with Europeans. He argued that the Aryans and Europeans (British) belong to

[55] *Adi-Hindu Bhajanavali: Part Four*, total of 16 pages. It was published for the UP conference held in November 1924.

[56] *Adi-Hindu Bhajan Sangraha*, cover page. Contains a total of 8 pages.

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common ancestors and they share common words like 'pitra' and 'mitra'. Hence, he concludes that *Achhuts* were the Adi-Hindus of this land.[57]

Adi-Hindu Vansh Ka Prachin Gaurav, a 16-page long poem, published by Mahasabha Press in 1926, outlines compelling reasons that may have motivated *Dwijas* or caste-Hindus to change the meaning of *Achhut* and introduce the practice of untouchability for discrimination and exploitation. It says

> nikli jo ye do jatiyan dvija-*chhut achhut* ke nam se
> rach di vyavastha varna ki khud maan pane ke lie
> lagi *chhut* jab divja-dosh ki tab *chhut* hindu ve huya
> *Achhut* ka mane palat phir hamse ghin karte bhaya
> [from the name God (pure/Achhut), emerged two castes of twice-born and impure
> (the dvijas) created the caste system to claim entitlements
> accused of being impure, then they claimed the purity for Hindus,
> they changed the meaning of *achhut* and started hating us.][58]

Acutely aware of the ideological battle over the interpretation of *Achhut*, the Mahasabha was engaging with Hindu notions of *chhut* and *Achhut*. More importantly, this play with *chhut* and *Achhut* in the publications of Mahasabha and in Ramchandra Shukla's poem also indicates contestations taking place over the meaning of this term. The long poem goes on to argue that our heritage has been kept alive in the *Nirgun* Bhakti tradition and we should recover and circulate it among people so that they can recognise their long tradition of struggle against inequality. Claiming that the *diwijas* or the caste-Hindus institutionalised untouchability in the name of *Achhut* or purity, *Achhuts* were converted into impure slaves. Recovering *Achhut* as a new category from the *Nirgun* Bhakti tradtion to organise a radical politics was crucial to formulating the agenda of Mahasabha.

We must appreciate the massive implication of the Mahasabha pamphlet literature in revising our existing understanding of *Nirgun* Bhakti in Hindi and religious studies' historiography. The Mahasabha's publications are the earliest evidence we have of Dalit engagement with *Nirgun* Bhakti saints like Kabir and especially Raidas. It published a 10-page anthology of Raidas' poems titled *Raidas Bajan Mala* in 1927.[59] Indeed, most early twentieth- century studies of Hindi literature and language do not mention Dalit engagement with *Nirgun* Bhakti in their *mohallas* or the presence of Chamar Saint Raidas in this tradition. In a reading that became popular at this time, Syamasundara Dasa's history of Hindi literature presents *Nirgun* Bhakti as an effort on the part of low caste Hindu and Muslim reform-

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 5.
[58] *Adi-Hindu Vansh ka Prachin Gaurav*, pp. 7–8.
[59] Adi-Hindu Mahasabha, *Raidas Bhajan Mala*.

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ers to create a syncretic religion in North India.[60] Pitampar Barthwal's widely recognised 1936 book, *The Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry: An Exposition of Medieval Indian Santa Mysticism*, does not mention the relationship with the Dalits. In *Songs of the Saints of India*, Jack Hawley's discussion of Raidas is based on the *Adi Granth* and Hindi-language writings published after 1959 but not before that period.[61] The circulation of *Nirgun* Bhakti, both literary and oral, among Dalit *mohallas*, was noticed and recognised in mainstream historiography only in the last two decades. A focus on *Nirgun* Bhakti also opens up possibilities of re-writing India's intellectual history because Dalit groups in North India used it to engage with inequality and liberalism.

Leading Dalit activists and Hindi-language literary scholars, such as, Kanwal Bharati, Mohandas Naimishray and Omprakash Valimiki, have emphasised the continuous role of *Nirgun* Bhakti practices in Dalit villages in contemporary India. However, I want to historicise this relationship between *Nirgun* Bhakti and Dalits through the writings of a leading Hindi poet and scholar, Suryakant Tripathi Nirala, whose work acquired fame by the middle of the twentieth century. Nirala's 1939 autobiographical story, 'Chaturi Chamar', set outside of Kanpur in the 1920s and included in his autobiographical novel *Kulli Bhat*, tells us in great detail about the alternative *Nirgun* tradition that he discovered in the Dalit *mohalla* or village—adjacent to the family village. Nirala finally and fully understands the meaning of *Nirgun* Bhakti in *Chamyani*, the Chamar village, by listening to the *bhajans* of Kabir, Surdas, Paltudas and other Sants. He writes that Chaturi 'enjoyed an even deeper knowledge of the Sant literature than most of our Brahmin Chaturvedis, and perhaps only on account of his illiteracy' he could not write a book and profit from it. He confessed that earlier he would laugh at *Nirgun* verses. After listening to Chaturi's collection of songs one night outside his house, Nirala developed a new respect and appreciation for *Nirgun* tradition for its literary value and social criticism. He agreed with Chaturi Chamar's assessment that 'even reputed scholars don't understand the meaning of *Nirgun*-bhakti' (*kaka ye nirgun-pad bare-bare vidhvan nahin samajthe*).[62]

Conclusion

A genealogy of *Achhut* has opened up new ways of exploring the cultural history of North India. The literary and political activism of Adi-Hindu Mahasabha, the Hindi-language sources, consisting of lexicons, journals and books has helped us recover this transition. As a category of political and cultural mobilisation appropriated by the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha from 1923 onwards, *Achhut* was transformed from an adjective, referring to the 'purity of an object or condition',

[60] Syamasundaradasa, *Hindi Sahitaya*.
[61] Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, pp. 3–23.
[62] Tripathi 'Nirala', *Chaturi Chamar*, pp. 9–10.

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to a noun referring to the Dalits. *Achhut* was first used in the Hindi literary magazine *Sarasvati* by Ramachandra Shukla in October 1914 in its dominant and current meaning to describe the condition of purity that the caste-Hindus and the untouchables share. This sole instance of its use in *Sarasvati* between 1900 and 1923 is equally telling. Second, the term was used in occasional English translations of Lala Lajpat Rai's articles and speeches exists in Hindi weekly newspaper *Pratap* from 1913 onwards but not by other newspapers. These are the only two isolated instances I could find, although we might find a few more random examples like this.

Given that the English word for *Achhut*, the noun 'untouchable', emerged in 1909, could *Achhut* be an English loan word of 'untouchable' in Hindi? My evidence suggests that *Achhut* as a noun referring to untouchables and as an adjective referring to untouchability acquired a dramatic and widespread use only after the 1920s. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, the term *Achhut* witnessed a fundamental change from its original meaning, pure and untouched to a wholly opposite explanation, impure and untouchables. This transition was closely connected with the extensive use of *Achhut* by the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha in its literary and political activism from 1923 onwards. Mahasabha's active use of *Achhut* was crucial to changing its meaning in the Hindi literary public sphere, a transition that was immediately noted. The 1927 special issue of Hindi literary magazine *Chand* was titled *Achhut*, many books such as the 1929 *Chhua-Chhut aur Arya Samaj* commented on the new meaning of the term *Achhut*, and it was 'officially' noted by the *Sankshipta Hindi Sabdasagar* in its first 1933 edition. Equally surprising was to discover how widely the term 'dalit' was used at this time in the Hindi media to not only describe the untouchables but also to describe the economically and socially exploited social groups in India.

This study began as an investigation to resolve a puzzle forced on to me by the Mahasabha publications in which *Achhut* was defined as untouched and pure. In this article, I have argued that the Mahasabha and Swami Achhutanand appropriated the category from *Nirgun* Bhakti tradition. In Sufi and *Nirgun* Bhakti, and in the tradition of the Kabir-panthis and Raidassis, the word *Achhut* had a long history dating back to the fifteenth century. It was used in a wide variety of contexts to emphasise the purity of a place, person and condition. More importantly, it was one of the many adjectives used to describe the 'undefiled' quality of god in the *Nirgun* tradition. The history of the *Nirgun* Bhakti tradition in the Dalit *mohallas* enabled the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha activists to draw from their own sources. As the Hindi luminary Nirala's 1930s story illustrates, *Chaturi Chamar* nurtured sentiments in the Dalit village against caste inequality by drawing from the heterodox religious traditions of *Nirgun* Bhakti. This religious genealogy made *Achhut* a natural category to appropriate because it also nicely captured the Mahasabha's agenda of claiming Dalits as the original, untouched and true inhabitants of India. It is for these reasons that this category imbued the Mahasabha with political and conceptual efficacy.

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In its literary and political activism, the Mahasabha appropriated the term *Achhut* in its original meaning. Yet, the activism by Dalit groups caused the term to occupy a new meaning in the Hindi world. For these reasons, we must embrace the Mahasabha's unparalleled contribution in creating the first radical category in Dalit politics.

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